



# NAVAL AIR ENGINEERING STATION

Lakehurst, New Jersey

## PRESS RELEASE

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### Legendary Sailor Passes Away

## **John Iannaccone, 94, Retired CPO, Airship Pioneer, HINDENBURG Ground Crewmember**

December 5, 2005, Lakehurst, NJ - John Antonino Iannaccone, 94, of LAKEWOOD, died Friday, December 2, 2005 at Kimball Medical Center, Lakewood. John was a retired Chief Petty Officer, United States Navy and a veteran of the Navy's World War II blimp program, as well as one of the last remaining "Sky Sailors" from the Navy's rigid airship era of the 1920's-1930's. John was also the last known living U.S. Navy ground crewmember from the HINDENBURG disaster.

Born in Fitchburg, MA on March 7, 1911 John enlisted in the Navy upon graduation from High School and became an Aviation Mechanic in the Navy's Lighter Than Air program at the Naval Air Station, Lakehurst NJ. In 1931, he received the prestigious assignment as a crew member on the Navy's giant dirigible USS LOS ANGELES (ZR-3) and was part of the crew that flew the airship on her famous 27-day deployment to the 1931 Panama Fleet Maneuvers.

Following transfer to the ground force at the Naval Air Station, Lakehurst John went to sea in support of fighter Squadrons on the aircraft carriers USS LEXINGTON (CV-2) and USS RANGER (CV-4.) Officers he served under at this time included future Fleet Admirals Ernest J. King and William F. Halsey.

John returned to duty at NAS LAKEHURST in late 1934. The Navy's rigid airship program had suffered a devastating blow when the USS AKRON (ZRS-4) had crashed off Barnegat the year before, sister ship USS MACON was based on the West Coast. The LOS ANGELES was out of service but still used for mooring experiments on the Lakehurst field and there were a few small patrol and training blimps, which John flew aboard regularly as the on-board "Mech." It is also at this time that he met and married his wife, Catherine, and they remained together for 56 years until her passing in 1990.

In 1936, John was one of the Navy ground crew that regularly handled the arrivals and departures of the new German Zeppelin HINDENBURG on her ten round trips to Lakehurst that year. John was standing underneath the HINDENBURG ready to grab a mooring line when she erupted in flame while landing at Lakehurst on May 6, 1937. Within 34 seconds, the aerial pride of Nazi Germany had collapsed into a burning heap on the landing field. Thirteen passengers, twenty-two

crewmembers and one member of the ground handling crew died as a result of the accident. Miraculously, there were 62 survivors.

Along with his fellow sailors, officers and bystanders, John helped rescue stunned and injured passengers from the burning wreckage. Nearly seventy years later, John could still vividly relate the events of that night and was the interview subject for many books, articles and TV documentaries in the ensuing decades. John never believed the stories about sabotage or latter-day "crackpot science" theories that flammable paint or "dope" on the fabric's outer skin of the HINDENBURG was responsible for the disaster. "We used non-flammable helium gas in our Navy airships, but our training balloons and the station kite balloons still used hydrogen. We used to handle it and we knew how dangerous it was. The HINDENBURG was inflated with hydrogen, she was tail heavy from a gas leak and they flew in under a thunderstorm. That hydrogen was an accident waiting to happen. It's that simple!" John said to a National Geographic documentary producer just this past July.

Going back to sea in the summer of 1937, he was assigned to the new aircraft carrier YORKTOWN (CV-5) and became an Aviation Chief Machinist's Mate and Plane Captain on the aircraft carrier ENTERPRISE (CV-6). He had just shifted over to the new aircraft carrier WASP (CV-7) at Norfolk Naval Base when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Expecting to be sent to fight in the Pacific, John suddenly found that the Navy had other plans for him. The Navy was expanding its blimp fleet for anti-submarine and air-sea rescue patrols and all men with Lighter Than Air experience were ordered back to Airship Squadron 12 (ZP-12) at Naval Air Station, Lakehurst. John would humorously relate, "A lot of guys in Lighter Than Air had more time than me, but because I spent more time at sea I became a Chief Petty Officer before most of them. We were all back at Lakehurst, tripping over each other. We were supposed to be Aviation Mechanics but they didn't have any tools for us to use. I once had to perform a 120-hour check on a blimp engine with nothing but a pair of pliers and a screwdriver! Finally, one of the Division Officers got frustrated with all the red tape and they went over to a hardware store in Lakewood and bought every tool kit they had!"

John also logged hundreds of hours in the air on the Navy's wartime K-type patrol blimps. He flew on the first wartime patrol out of the new Naval Air Station at South Weymouth, Massachusetts in a blimp borrowed from Lakehurst. The long patrol flights were exhausting, uncomfortable and always dangerous as they kept an eye out for German U-Boats. John's longest wartime flight was 28 hours in duration. They generally flew every third day. Catherine got a job in a bank in Lakewood and she and John had an apartment there, deciding that they would like to make Lakewood their permanent home after the war.

They kept the Lakewood apartment when John was transferred to Squadron ZP-21 at Naval Air Station, Richmond FL. Having come through the war in one piece without ever having to leave the Continental United States, John witnessed his second major fire when all three of the giant wooden blimp hangars at Richmond collapsed and burned in a 130 mile-per-hour hurricane in September 1945. Two dozen blimps, hundreds of Navy and commercial airplanes and hundreds of military and private vehicles had been parked in the big hangars for safety during the hurricane and all of them were destroyed, including John's 1939 Oldsmobile. "Cars were scarce and I had a hell of a time getting a new car!" he would bitterly relate.

Transferred back to Lakehurst, John ended up being sent to San Francisco in 1948 and was on his way to an assignment in Hawaii...where there was no family housing available for his wife. At his point, John retired from active duty with the Navy.

John was able to get a civilian position at Naval Air Station, Lakehurst. He worked in the Overhaul & Repair Department until it closed in 1962. He then transferred to the Supply Department until retirement ten years later. It was a very happy, comfortable second career. John and Catherine traveled extensively, and enjoyed their retirement years in the post-war "dream house" they built for themselves in Lakewood. They were active supporters of their church, St. Mary of the Lake in Lakewood, where they had attended since 1934.

John was an active supporter of the Lakehurst Borough Historical Society and Honorary Life Member of the Navy Lakehurst Historical Society, where his generosity made possible the finishing of "The John and Catherine Iannacone Exhibit Room" at the Navy Lakehurst Information Center in Historic Hangar #1. John was regularly on hand to answer questions from serious scholars and young aviation enthusiasts alike. The preservation of the period of Naval Aviation History that he served in was intensely important to John.

John was honored by Lakehurst in 2002 by having a street named after him - Iannaccone Way; it serves as the entry street to the NAES Lakehurst Commercial Gate. At the time, John remarked, "I'm the only one lucky enough to have a street named after him while still alive."

In 2003, the Navy invited John to the commissioning of the newest aircraft carrier, the USS RONALD REAGAN (CVN-76). It was noted by Navy dignitaries at the event, that John was one of the few if only remaining sailors who had sailed on board both the USS LANGLEY (CV-1) and the USS LEXINGTON (CV-2).

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